

“A Dialogue that Knows no Border between Nationality, Race or Culture”: Themes, Impact and the Critical Reception of *Far from Mogadishu*.¹

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Translating hits nerves in the text; elements emerge that did not stand out, which maybe in the original language we did not even notice if they were there or not. So the translation is almost a new text, in fact; it has the power, in my eyes, of a new text.²

Shirin Ramzanali Fazel's *Far from Mogadishu* was published almost twenty years ago, in 1994, and reprinted once, in 1999.³ The current republication is an expanded bilingual version (in Italian and English) that revisits that text. Although it was distributed by a small publisher, *Far from Mogadishu* is crucial in the contemporary literary panorama for at least three reasons: the contribution to decolonising Italian memory, the testimony of a black person's experience living in Italy from the seventies to the nineties (and in the present version, to the 2000s), and the memory of a Mogadishu destroyed by a devastating civil war beginning in 1991, in view of a possible reconstruction of Somalia.

Together with *Aulò. Canto Poesia dell'Eritrea* by Ribka Sibhatu (1993)⁴ and the autobiographical account *Andiamo a spasso? Scirscir'n demna* by Maria Abebù Viarengo (1992),⁵ *Far from Mogadishu* was one of the first texts to present from the point of view of the colonised Italian colonial history, a period about which a guilty amnesia is in force. Somalia was an Italian protectorate from 1885 to 1905. It later became a colony, included in the empire from 1936 until the end of the Second World War. From 1950 to 1960, the United Nations entrusted the former colonisers with the administration of Somalia (AFIS). The AFIS was a sort of colonialism with a time limit, where Italy left administrators

¹ I would like to thank the Italian Department, the Humanities Research Centre and the Institute of Advanced Studies at the University of Warwick for supporting three research projects which invited Shirin Ramzanali Fazel as a guest: 'Kaleidoscope: New Perspectives on the Humanities' (28-29 May 2011), 'The Italian Trusteeship in Somalia (AFIS) and Beyond' (18 January 2012), and 'Migration, Discrimination and Belonging: Transnational Spaces in Postcolonial Europe' (6 March 2013).

² Luigi Meneghello, *Materia di Reading e altri reperti*, Milano, Rizzoli, 2005, p. 249 [my translation].

³ Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *Lontano da Mogadiscio*, Roma, DataneWS, 1994.

⁴ Ribka Sibhatu, *Aulò. Canto poesia dell'Eritrea*, Roma, Sinnos, 1993.

⁵ Maria Abebù Viarengo, *Andiamo a spasso? Scirscir'n demna*, in "Linea d'ombra" 54 (1992), pp. 75-128.

already present in the territory, mostly fascists, in the ex-colony.⁶ Shirin⁷ was born in this period, to be precise in 1953; she had a Somali mother and a Pakistani father, and studied “in middle schools and high schools [...] which were [...] run directly from Rome by the Minister of State Education [...] in the same way as any state school operating in Italian territory”.⁸ In *Far from Mogadishu*, Shirin says that “[she] studied Italian language at school” in Somalia,⁹ as well as “Garibaldi, Mazzini and their struggle for Italian unification”, and she “appreciated [...] Pietro Germi [...] the songs of Modugno, Mina, Gianni Morandi [and] Dante, Pavese, and Pirandello’s writings”.¹⁰

Italy and Somalia’s histories do not simply intertwine during the period of the AFIS. For example, the dictatorship of Siad Barre (1969-1991) was supported by Italy,¹¹ and Somalia was also the primary destination for Italian resources in the post-war cooperation.¹² The publication of *Far from Mogadishu* corresponds to another important episode in the relationship between Italy and Somalia, that is to say the murder of the television news journalist Ilaria Alpi and the cameraman Miran Hrovatin in Mogadishu. As recent inquiries seem to demonstrate, they were both investigating the traffic of arms coming from Italy and sold in Somalia in exchange for the removal of illicit waste.¹³ That investigation tried to clarify the role of Italian producers in the arms used in the Somali civil war, which started in 1991 with the deposition of Siad Barre and continued until a few months ago, when the process of the reconstruction of the new Somali state began. *Far from Mogadishu* bears witness to the relationship between Italy and

⁶ See Antonio Maria Morone, *L’ultima colonia: Come l’Italia è ritornata in Somalia 1950- 1960*, Bari-Roma, Laterza, 2011.

⁷ I refer to names of Arab, Somali and Tigrinya and Kikuyu origin using their first name according to the correct form used in those languages. The same criterium was applied in the bibliography. I chose this criterium, borrowed from African studies, to avoid the ambiguity with which scholars have referred to this writer so far using different forms, such as “Ramzanali, Fazel Shirin” or “Ramzanali Fazel, Shirin”.

⁸ Rebecca Hopkins, *Somalia: passato, presente e futuro. Intervista con la scrittrice Shirin Ramzanali Fazel*, in “El-ghibli. Rivista online di letteratura della migrazione” 18 (2007), http://www.el-ghibli.provincia.bologna.it/id_1-issue_04_18-section_6-index_pos_1.html [accessed 2 August 2013; my translation].

⁹ Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *Lontano da Mogadiscio. Far From Mogadishu*, Milano, Laurana, 2013, p. 153.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ See Angelo Del Boca, *Una sconfitta dell’intelligenza. Italia e Somalia*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1993.

¹² See Paolo Tripodi, *The Colonial Legacy in Somalia: Rome and Mogadishu: from Colonial Administration to Operation Restore Hope*, London, Palgrave-Mcmillan, 1999, pp.106-137.

¹³ See Roberto Scardova (ed.), *Carte false: l’assassinio di Ilaria Alpi e Miran Hrovatin. Quindici anni senza verità*, Roma, Ambiente, 2009.

Somalia, also showing that “this proximity is rarely reciprocal [as] Somalia is largely an unknown reality in contemporary Italy”.¹⁴

Far from Mogadishu started a process of revision of the colonial past that was then also dealt with independently by other Italian writers including, to mention just a few of the more well-known names, Cristina Ali Farah, Enrico Brizzi, Andrea Camilleri, Franca Cavagnoli, Erminia dell’Oro, Gabriella Ghermandi, Carlo Lucarelli, Igiaba Scego, and two of the members of the Wu Ming collective, whose works were produced “with four hands”.¹⁵ Some of these authors acknowledged the influence of Shirin’s work in their novels and in the Italian literary *Zeitgeist* in the years after. For example, Igiaba Scego defined Shirin as “an example that inspired the new generation of migrant writers”,¹⁶ and stated that “her words contain all the determination of Somali women. Strong and independent women, who have shouldered the fate of a country at war”.¹⁷ Some sections of Wu Ming 2 and Antar Mohamed’s *Timira. Romanzo Meticcio* were also inspired by the work of Shirin,¹⁸ in particular her second novel *Clouds on the Equator* (2010),¹⁹ a text which focuses on the story of a *meticcio* girl abandoned by her father during the AFIS period, who grows up in a Catholic orphanage and is rejected by both the communities she belongs to.

Far from Mogadishu played a fundamental role in decolonising the Italian imaginary, and in finally coming to terms with a history which research begun in the seventies showed to be full of atrocious crimes. Indeed, the Italians in Africa created concentration and forced labour camps,²⁰ and massively and

¹⁴ Lidia Curti, *Voices of a Minor Empire: Migrant Women Writers in Contemporary Italy*, in *The Cultures of Italian Migration*, Graziella Parati, Anthony Julian Tamburri (eds.), Madison, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011, pp.45-58.

¹⁵ For a list of some of the films and texts that have dealt with this theme in the last twenty years see Simone Brioni, *Coincidenze*, in *Somalitalia. Quattro vie per Mogadiscio/Somalitalia. Four Roads to Mogadishu*, Simone Brioni (ed.), Roma, Kimerafilm, 2012 [this section is included in the documentary *Per un discorso postcoloniale italiano: parole chiave*]. Wu Ming 1 and Roberto Santachiara’s *Point Lenana* has not been included in this list as it was published in 2013. See Wu Ming 1 and Roberto Santachiara, *Point Lenana*, Torino, Einaudi, 2013.

¹⁶ Igiaba Scego, *Shirin Ramzanali F. Scrittrice Nomade*, in “Internazionale” 732 (22 Febbraio 2008), p. 60 [my translation].

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 62 [my translation].

¹⁸ Wu Ming 2 and Antar Mohamed, *Timira. Romanzo Meticcio*, Torino, Einaudi, 2012, p. 516.

¹⁹ Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *Nuvole sull’equatore. Gli italiani dimenticati. Una storia*, Cuneo, Nerosubianco, 2010.

²⁰ A map of these camps is available on the website *I campi fascisti: Dalle guerre in Africa alla Repubblica di Salò*, www.campifascisti.it [accessed 2 August 2013].

indiscriminately used chemical weapons against civilians.²¹ The meaning and importance of the present publication seems to be once more confirmed by the recent attempt to name a mausoleum at Affile, in the province of Rome, after the fascist war criminal Rodolfo Graziani, which demonstrates how historical evidence did not manage to find its way into the Italians' collective consciousness.

Secondly, Shirin's text is the testimony of a black person's life story in Northern Italy, first in Novara (from 1971 to 1976) and then near Vicenza (where the writer has lived since 1985), in a period which precedes more widespread African immigration to these areas. *Far from Mogadishu* is one of the first novels written in the Italian language to narrate an experience of migration without the help of an Italian co-author in order to guarantee the volume's linguistic correctness, in contrast to the first novels about immigration published at the beginning of the nineties.²² Moreover, Shirin's is a female voice, which aims to bring to light the role of women in history since, as the writer pointed out in an interview, they "keep together the various threads of family and friends, take care of the old people, and the children. It is always the women who keep the traditions, the memories, the taste of food, who know how to tell their stories and are not afraid of crying then smiling again. Women are the link between the past, present and future".²³

The theme of migration is central to Shirin's work and her gaze allows us to re-read Italy's recent history from the perspective of someone who experienced the problems of many immigrants, revealing a substantial continuity in the disinterest for their political and social recognition in the last twenty years.²⁴

²¹ See Angelo del Boca, *I crimini del colonialismo fascista*, in *Le guerre coloniali del fascismo*, Angelo Del Boca (ed.), Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1991, pp. 232-255.

²² For an analysis of collaborative texts written in this period see the following articles: Jennifer Burns, *Frontiere nel testo: autori, collaborazioni e mediazioni nella scrittura italoфона della migrazione*, in Jennifer Burns, Loredana Polezzi (eds.), *Borderlines: Migrazioni e identità nel Novecento*, Isernia, Cosmo Iannone, 2003, pp. 203-212; Jennifer Burns, *Outside Voices Within: Immigration Literature in Italian*, in *Trends in Contemporary Italian Narrative 1980-2007*, in Ania Gillian, Ann Hallamore Caesar (eds.), Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars, 2007, pp. 136-154; Sharon Wood, *A «Quattro Mani»: Collaboration in Italian Immigrant Literature*, in Sara Bigliazzi, Sharon Wood (eds.), *Collaboration in the Arts from the Middle Ages to the Present*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2006, pp. 151-162.

²³ Monica Venturini *CONTROCANONE. Per una cartografia della scrittura coloniale e postcoloniale italiana*, Roma, Aracne, 2010, p. 142 [my translation].

²⁴ See Wu Ming, *Primavera Migrante*, in "Internazionale" (4 April 2013), <http://www.internazionale.it/opinioni/wu-ming/2013/04/04/primavera-migrante/> [accessed 2 August

However, assuming that Shirin's experience of migration might be a paradigm to understand that of other immigrants is misleading for at least two reasons. Firstly, when Shirin arrived in Italy in 1971 she had moved to a country where she was already a "citizen" thanks to her marriage in 1970 (note that at that time Italian citizenship was given through marriage only to the spouse of an Italian male).²⁵ Secondly, Shirin left Somalia for "political reasons"²⁶ rather than economic ones like a large number of African immigrants in Italy: hers was an exile, a one-way trip, decided because of the military dictatorship and the civil war. After the coup in 1969, Siad Barre had actually ordered out of the country those who did not own a Somali passport, which the writer did not have due to her Pakistani father.

Although Shirin's experience is different from that of many other immigrants, *Far from Mogadishu* can be read as the barometer of the drift towards increasing racism against immigrants in Italy in the last few years. Whilst the country Shirin arrived in was ignorant and curious about immigrants, the one where she found herself living in the nineties after having opened a restaurant in Kenya (from 1996 to 2004) and which she left in 2010 to go to the United Kingdom, is described as clearly xenophobic.²⁷ Despite this, Shirin never *really* distanced herself from Italy, since it was there she formed most of her attachments and bought her own house. The choice to republish this text is testimony to this connection, as well as to the writer's commitment to influence change in the current social situation in Italy.

A third reason for the interest in this editorial project is linked to the fact that *Far from Mogadishu* narrates the recent history of Somalia and the experience of diaspora from a literary perspective. *Far from Mogadishu* is a valid example of the dynamic character of diasporic writing, of its forced adaptability to historical and geographical changes, and its becoming "the means through which [...] writers can find a space and discuss their own self and the ways that their multi-

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²⁵ Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *Lontano da Mogadiscio. Far From Mogadishu*, cit., p. 207.

²⁶ Rebecca Hopkins, cit. [my translation].

²⁷ See Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *Le storie intrecciate della diaspora somala/The Intervoven Stories of Somali Diaspora*, in *Somalitalia: Quattro Vie per Mogadiscio. Somalitalia: Four Roads to Mogadishu*, Simone Brioni (ed.), Alberto Carpi (trans.), Roma, Kimerafilm, 2012, p. 24.

layered cultural identity is formed”.²⁸ Texts by writers from the Somali diaspora represent the heritage of a culture which has also proliferated in written form in other languages, given that Somali has been written as a codified alphabet since 1972.²⁹ For this reason it should be noted that, having emigrated to Italy before this date, Shirin can write better in Italian than in Somali, despite being able to speak it perfectly.

In particular, this novel narrates the pain connected to the destruction of Mogadishu, Shirin’s native city, which the writer describes with these words: “When the civil war broke out in 1991 I was in Italy, it felt like I was going mad, seeing my city bombarded, reduced to a pile of rubble, it was as if they had taken away my identity. Places dear to me that had formed who I was had become dust, erased forever [...] Unfortunately today it is still [...] a wound that has never healed. And this is not only for me but for all the Somali diaspora”.³⁰ Mogadishu is a city that exists in the stories of its inhabitants, now displaced in various parts of the world, and only thanks to their memories can it be reconstructed. *Far from Mogadishu* can be credited with drawing attention to the civil war in Somalia without the sensationalist rhetoric of the western media, and above all with speaking about the thousand-year coexistence of different cultures which was there before it.³¹

Even the most renowned Somali author in the Anglophone world, Nuruddin Farah, acknowledged that Shirin was “the first [author] to write a book about the civil war from a Somali perspective”,³² through the words of the protagonist of his novel *Links* (2004), Jeebleh. Reading *Far from Mogadishu*, Jeebleh “was pleased that Somalis were recording their ideas about themselves and their

²⁸ Roberta Di Carmine, *Italophone Writing and The Intellectual Space of Creativity. Shirin Ramzanali Fazel and “Lontano da Mogadiscio”*, in “Quaderni del '900” 4 (2004), p. 49.

²⁹ David Laitin, *Politics, Language, and Thought: The Somali Experience*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1977, p. 163.

³⁰ Serena Morassutti, *Intervista a Shirin Ramzanali Fazel*, in “Kuma” (2009), <http://www.disp.let.uniroma1.it/kuma/poetica/kuma17morassutti.pdf> [accessed 2 August 2013; my translation].

³¹ Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *Lontano da Mogadiscio. Far From Mogadishu*, cit., p. XX. The devastation of the multicultural environment of Mogadishu due to the civil war is also remembered by Shirin in the short story *Mukulaal*. See Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *Mukulaal (Cat)*, in *Roma d’Abissinia. Cronache dai resti dell’impero. Asmara, Mogadiscio, Addis Abeba*, Daniele Comberiati (ed.), Cuneo, Nerosubianco, 2010, pp. 13-22.

³² Nuruddin Farah, *Links*, New York, Riverhead, 2004, p. 227.

country, sometimes in their own language, sometimes in foreign tongues. These efforts, meager as they might seem, pointed to the gaps in the world's knowledge about Somalia. Reading the slim volume had been salutary, because unlike many books by authors with clan-sharpened axes to grind, this was not a grievance-driven pamphlet".³³ As Lorenzo Mari has pointed out, Nuruddin Farah suggests that *Far from Mogadishu* allows us to understand the links between the members of the Somali diaspora and "the transnational debate about Somalia and Somali postcolonial literature",³⁴ showing "the existing gaps not only in Italian postcolonial knowledge, but also in the world's knowledge regarding Somalia at the time of the *Restore Hope* operation, which is encapsulated by the event of *Black Hawk Down*, in October 1993".³⁵

Two characters in *Links*, Jeebleh and Shanta, also discuss how Shirin was able to link her Somali origins to Persian ones, noting that her name and part of her family originated from there.³⁶ According to Mari, these characters praise Shirin for "[seeing herself] as part of 'one big Somali family'", "while many Somalis, re-tribalized by the colonial administration, by Barre's politics and by the clan-based violence of the civil war, aren't able to".³⁷ This passage of *Links* is useful for understanding how the definition of the author's identity in *Far from Mogadishu* can change in relation to the context in which the novel is read. Whilst Shirin has often been defined as a "Somali" and "migrant" writer in Italy, the two characters in *Links* talk about her as a second generation Somali writer – her father was born in Zanzibar in 1917, and moved to Somalia in 1945 – , and for this reason it is extrinsic to the clanism that erupts in the country during the civil war.

For (at least) these three reasons, writing the foreword to *Far from Mogadishu* is a difficult responsibility, but one which can take advantage of a lively critical debate. At the same time, the reprinting of a text that catalysed the attention of

³³ Ibid. pp.226-227.

³⁴ Lorenzo Mari, "'It was no mean feat for a housewife'. Shirin Ramzanali Fazel's *Lontano da Mogadiscio* (1994) in Nuruddin Farah's *Links* (2004)", 2012 [paper at the conference "Interrogating Cosmopolitan Conviviality. New Dimensions of the European in Literature", Otto-Friedrich-Universität Bamberg, 25 May].

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Nuruddin Farah, cit., p. 252.

³⁷ Lorenzo Mari, cit.

many literary scholars in the last twenty years can provide the opportunity to reflect on the development of migrant writing in Italian. In particular, the retrospective reading of the introduction to the first edition of *Far from Mogadishu* by Alessandra Atti di Sarro provides useful information about a critical discourse dominant at the beginning of the nineties and later widely called into question, which I believe managed to lead some readers astray regarding the intentions and the potentialities of this text.

To clarify, my analysis does not wish to negate the commendable and pioneering work of this journalist, who can also be credited with finding a publisher for the text. Re-reading this introduction “in hindsight”, should above all be a reminder not to trust paratexts too much (including the current one), and to interrogate the text independently. It should also be noted that whilst this afterword aims to collect and examine the varied critical responses to *Far from Mogadishu* (often quite difficult to track down and written both in English and Italian), Atti di Sarro’s introduction had a completely different function, that is to support and present to an audience of compatriots the novelty of a text written in Italian by an author of non-Italian origin.

Atti di Sarro’s introduction has a good grasp of Shirin’s ability to develop “a dialogue that knows no border between nationality, race or culture”.³⁸ However, at the same time the journalist presents the author as an immigrant, whose story can be assimilated into a wider dynamic of economic migration: “we find ourselves, us from the Old Continent, crowded with another type of visitor. They are no longer – from the North – ineffable rich tourists greedy for culture and artistic beauty, rather – from the South – droves of poor things looking for a bit of prosperity”.³⁹ Atti di Sarro also underlines the “vulnerability” of these immigrants, who “can only count on the hospitality that others can offer them”.⁴⁰ This condition does not seem to represent that of Shirin, who arrived in “a country [she] knew”,⁴¹ curious to confirm that the idea she had got of Italy from

³⁸ Alessandra Atti di Sarro, *Introduzione*, in Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *Lontano da Mogadiscio*, Roma, Datanews, 1994, p. 9 [my translation].

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10 [my translation].

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* [my translation].

⁴¹ Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *Lontano da Mogadiscio. Far From Mogadishu*, cit., p. 158.

books was true.⁴² Shirin is a cosmopolitan intellectual – with a cosmopolitanism which she associates several times with her religion, Islam – ,⁴³ who since 1976 has travelled to Zambia, the United States (where the writer lived for two years, from 1987 to 1989), Saudi Arabia, Canada, Kenya, and Zanzibar.⁴⁴ For Shirin the travel dimension is not therefore exclusively connected to migration, but also to tourism. A significant section of *Far from Mogadishu* entitled “The suitcase”⁴⁵ “measures the capacity of migrant memory by comparing the tourist’s and the immigrant’s suitcase”,⁴⁶ which contain the souvenirs bought in an exotic destination and all the memories of a land perhaps left forever respectively.⁴⁷ Thus Luigi Marfè defined *Far from Mogadishu* as a “counter-travel book”; it “[stages] a sort of Grand Tour in reverse, which, instead of describing Italy as the land of classical culture, shows the contradictions of its grassroots, especially with regard to the theme of how foreigners are received”.⁴⁸ In other words, *Far from Mogadishu* overturns some of the *topoi* of tourist discourse, such as “the dialectics between the observer – who is not European, but African – and the observed – who are not African, but Italian natives”.⁴⁹

Furthermore, the introduction tends to create a dichotomous opposition between the immigrants’ culture and “Western culture”, referring to the readers as a cohesive group of which Atti di Sarro is part: “Us westerners”.⁵⁰ This opposition is accentuated by the cover of the 1994 edition which shows the face of a young African woman with very dark skin, her head covered by a veil clearly of oriental craftsmanship, contributing to the identification of the author of *Far from Mogadishu* as foreign. In open opposition to this paratext, the cover of the present edition instead bears witness to the autobiographical character of *Far*

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 167.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. XX.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 201.

⁴⁶ Cinzia Sartini Blum, *Rewriting the Journey in Contemporary Italian Literature: Figures of Subjectivity in Progress*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2008, p. 243.

⁴⁷ Shirin compares the travel experience of a tourist and a migrant also in the story *Villaggio globale*. See Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *Villaggio globale*, in “El ghibli. Rivista online di letteratura della migrazione” 30 (2010), http://www.el-ghibli.provincia.bologna.it/id_1-issue_07_30-section_1-index_pos_4.html [accessed 2 August 2013].

⁴⁸ Luigi Marfè, *Italian Counter-Travel Writing: Images of Italy in Contemporary Migration Literature*, in “Studies in Travel Writing” 16.2 (2012), p. 192.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 194.

⁵⁰ Alessandra Atti di Sarro, cit., p. 8 [my translation].

from Mogadishu.

The description of the borders of Italy and Somalia found in *Far from Mogadishu* seems to have cultural and geographical borders that are certainly less clear-cut than the first edition's paratextual apparatus indicates. According to Roberta di Carmine, "the 'walls' [Shirin] is referring to at the beginning of her text, symbolically resemble those borders – national, political, social, and cultural – which have slowly and inevitably prevented individuals [from revealing but also from defining] their own identity".⁵¹ Moreover, when Shirin sees the images of the destruction of Mogadishu on television she feels part of the tragedy happening to her people,⁵² but at the same time represents herself as "a white observer separated from this tragedy",⁵³ since she is "part of a privileged group whose cultural whiteness has contaminated the interpretation of her own past".⁵⁴ Graziella Parati, who has commented in detail on this significant passage of the text, has underlined that Shirin describes multiple belongings, delineating her identity as hybrid: "starting from a description of her familial community at the dinner table, identified as an initial 'us', [Shirin] changes the representation of community, of the 'us', beyond the domestic sphere into a public 'us' that is not defined along colour lines. That 'us' made of people watching the same images on Italian television involves an elaboration of the concept of sameness that includes those who participate in and validate narratives on otherness that seem so distant on television. [...] Same and different become [...] permeable entities that collaborate in defining the large community she is addressing. [Shirin] expresses the need for a redefinition of community and for a collective act of witnessing the construction of multicultural Italian identities".⁵⁵

The way in which Shirin positions herself distant from or close to Italy or Somalia is also entirely unique. Contrary to the title, the capital of Somalia is never truly far, but rather "is narrated in the present tense, yet [Shirin]'s own life

⁵¹ Roberta Di Carmine, *Italophone Writing and The Intellectual Space of Creativity. Shirin Ramzanali Fazel and "Lontano da Mogadiscio"*, in "*Quaderni del '900*" 4 (2004), p.48.

⁵² Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *Lontano da Mogadiscio. Far From Mogadishu*, cit., p. 191.

⁵³ Graziella Parati, *Migration Italy. The Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2005, p. 8.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 65.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 66.

in Somalia, as detailed in *Parte prima*, is recounted in the past tense with the almost complete non-appearance of its author”.⁵⁶ The ambiguous relationship that Shirin, an “Italian with dark skin”,⁵⁷ has with her country of which she is a resident and citizen is well expressed in this passage of *Far from Mogadishu*: “I am an Italian citizen, I participate in and experience the problems, the suffering that all Italians face every day. I contribute to the life and the evolution of this country. Now that both my parents are buried here, I feel even more tied to this land. Italy is my home; my relationships are here, my friends. Even so, there is always someone who reminds me that I am an intruder, an anomaly”.⁵⁸

What is delineated in *Far from Mogadishu* is therefore a dynamic of double belonging together with double unbelonging. Lucia Benchouiha describes it more precisely with these words: “the structural and geographical divisions [...] suggest a doubling but also a fragmented notion of national identification [...] from somewhere ‘in-between’ the two countries, both ‘here’ and ‘there’, yet incongruously neither entirely ‘there’ nor wholly ‘here’. The fracturing of the setting and organisation of the text has similar repercussions for perceptions of time in this narrative since the partitions between the ‘there’ (Somalia) and the ‘here’ (Italy) are similarly expressed in a temporal fashion between the ‘before/then’ (Somalia) and the ‘after/now’ (Italy)”.⁵⁹ In an article that focuses on similar issues, Nathan Vetri analyses a passage of the text in which it talks about the birth of a *meticcio* boy called Michele,⁶⁰ and argues that Shirin indicates a third way of living in a new country, beyond the dichotomous opposition between integration and rejection, that is “suspension, achieved primarily through the ambiguity of the characters that inhabit the Italian spaces within texts. [...] their bodies are successfully capable of negotiating outside the realms of Italianess and non, thus *dissolving* essentialist dichotomies of ‘us’ and ‘them’,

⁵⁶ Lucie Benchouiha, “Dov’è la mia casa?”. *Questions of Home in Shirin Ramzanali Fazel's “Lontano da Mogadiscio”*, in “Quaderni del ’900” 4 (2004), p. 41.

⁵⁷ Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *Lontano da Mogadiscio. Far From Mogadishu*, cit., p. 207.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 207. It should be noted that the condition which Shirin very much resembles is that of the *meticcio* protagonist of *Clouds on the Equator*, considered to be “out of place” in Italy: “As a dark-skinned Italian, she did not feel at home at all”. See Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *Nuvole sull’equatore*, cit., p. 194.

⁵⁹ Lucie Benchouiha, “Dov’è la mia casa?”, cit., p. 38.

⁶⁰ Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *Lontano da Mogadiscio. Far From Mogadishu*, cit., pp. 208.

of ‘same’ and ‘other’”.⁶¹

Similarly, *Far from Mogadishu* describes the concept of home as “a plury- or trans-local concept”.⁶² According to Jennifer Burns, the references to the life of Shirin in different towns “underscore this notion that home is a practice of negotiating and (re)constructing affective attachments in and between places. Since all those locations are collectively defined by being ‘lontano da Mogadiscio’, however, the text also cements the notion that there is an origin, an *Ur-home*, to which all others refer in a shifting economy of affects”.⁶³ In other words, the concept of home represented in the novel can be “less accurately grasped according to a vertical model, where the place of origin is buried deep in a past which is also geographically distant, than by a notion of horizontality, whereby different homes are layered and superimposed over one another as sites of historical memory and experience, both for the individual and the nation or culture, at the same time as they offer sites of belonging for the present and future”.⁶⁴ *Lontano da Mogadiscio* not only recreates the memory of Mogadishu, but also brings the town to life in the here and now, engaging the reader emotively in its reconstruction: “Home – Mogadishu – is all-pervasive in the text, but it is a home which is both lost in the past and dynamically visible in the present, and at the same time, a home which is radically, sometimes exotically, different and distant from Italy and insistently connected to everyday life in Italy. [...] Home travels with [Shirin] not only as a personal and emotional totem, but rather as an entire, mobile *habitus*; the cultural, political, moral, geographical, and affective reality of her home country”.⁶⁵

The introduction to the first edition includes *Far from Mogadishu* in a group of texts written by immigrants in Italian, which it describes as a single corpus, and altogether devoid of discursive complexity: “books like that of Shirin Ramzanali Fazel (and of other immigrant authors before her), [are] bare and

⁶¹ Nathan Vetri, *Transgression, Integration, Suspension: The Sense Wars / Space Wars of the Body in Italian Literature and Film 2011*, in *The Cultures of Italian Migration*, Graziella Parati, Anthony Julian Tamburri (eds.), Madison, Farleigh Dickinson University Press, p. 174.

⁶² Lucie Benchouiha, “Dov’è la mia casa?”, cit., p. 36.

⁶³ Jennifer Burns, *Migrant Imaginaries: Figures in Italian Migration Literature*, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2013, p. 126.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 127.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 122.

simple ‘travel’ narratives, [...] without charm, in which there are very few are comments, [...] or clear and direct judgements”.⁶⁶ In other words, Shirin simply talked “about herself to herself, to others, to the world”,⁶⁷ and it is “nothing more and nothing less than her own story”.⁶⁸ This judgement seems to be further confirmed by some critical analysis of writings by immigrants in Italian that claimed there was an evolution from a series of autobiographical works, which are more interesting from a sociological rather than literary point of view, to novels with more refined and complex narrative structures.

These models seem to be based on two assumptions that are deep-rooted in Western culture and, as such, they seem inappropriate to be applied to experiences that are not entirely located in one singular cultural context: the distinction between “high” and “low” cultural forms, and that between different literary genres, which are seen as fixed, monolithical and non permeable categories.⁶⁹ However, Shirin’s successive literary works – which include the novel *Clouds on the Equator* and the short stories *Omdurmann’s Secret* (published for the first time in 1995 in the journal “Italian Studies in Southern Africa”, and available online since 2009),⁷⁰ *Gabriel* (2008),⁷¹ *The Beach* (2008),⁷² *Global Village* (2010),⁷³ *Mukulaal (Cat)* (2010),⁷⁴ and *DNA* (2011)⁷⁵ –, suggest that *Far from Mogadishu* is not the episodic experience of an immigrant who has become a writer merely because of her life experience. Shirin has used the autobiographical genre among others to talk about “the issues arising in Italian multicultural society”, in the same way in which “other Italian

⁶⁶ Alessandra Atti di Sarro, cit., p. 10 [my translation].

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 8 [my translation].

⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 8-9 [my translation].

⁶⁹ On this topic, see Jennifer Burns, *Migrant Imaginaries*, cit., pp.16, 196.

⁷⁰ Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *Il segreto di Omdurmann*, in “El-ghibli. Rivista online di letteratura della migrazione” 23 (2009), http://www.el-ghibli.provincia.bologna.it/index.php?id=2&issue=05_23&sezione=2&testo=2 [accessed 2 August 2013; this story was published for the first time in “Studi d’Italianistica nell’Africa Australe/ Italian Studies in Southern Africa” 8.2 (1995)].

⁷¹ Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *Gabriel*, in “El-ghibli. Rivista online di letteratura della migrazione” 19 (2008), http://www.el-ghibli.provincia.bologna.it/id_1-issue_04_19-section_1-index_pos_3.html [accessed 2 August 2013].

⁷² Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *La spiaggia*, in “Scritture Migranti” 1, 2007, pp. 9-14.

⁷³ Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *Villaggio Globale*, cit.

⁷⁴ Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *Mukulaal (Gatto)*, cit.

⁷⁵ Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *DNA*, in “El-ghibli. Rivista online di letteratura della migrazione” 33 (2011), http://www.el-ghibli.provincia.bologna.it/id_1-issue_08_33-section_1-index_pos_2.html [accessed 2 August 2013].

authors write about the Mafia and the Camorra”.⁷⁶

Moreover, the composite structure into which *Far from Mogadishu* is subdivided seems to indicate that this work is an autobiography *sui generis*. As Shirin has stated in an interview, *Far from Mogadishu* does not follow a chronological order, but rather links different situations together in relation to the emotions inspired by the narration of the events.⁷⁷ The original nucleus of this text was divided into “six parts, each about a subject or a period: the Somalia of her childhood, her arrival in Italy, travels to other countries, Somalia at war, Somalia and Africa through Italians’ eyes, identity and political and ethical commitment”.⁷⁸ In the new version there are also two unedited sections which deal with Shirin’s recent move to the UK. The time periods which intertwine in *Far from Mogadishu* are therefore at least four: the memory of Somalia before 1970 described in 1994, the narration in the present of 1994, the re-reading and re-writing of those parts from the viewpoint of 2013, and the writing in the present of Shirin’s daily life in 2013. By doing this, Shirin further complicates the operation of “translating immigration into emigration”, through which “displacement” becomes a “re-discovery of the ‘place’ from which she has been removed”.⁷⁹

Although it is based on the life experiences of the author, *Far from Mogadishu* tells a story which transcends the personal.⁸⁰ As has been noted before, the 1994 version of *Far from Mogadishu* already described multiple belongings, including for example that of the television audience who watched Somalia’s drama in the west, and of a group discriminated against in Italy because of the colour of their skin. Moreover, Shirin mentioned other members of the Somali diaspora like “Mumina, Dahir, Abdi”,⁸¹ who shared their stories and contribute “to

⁷⁶ Simone Brioni, *Orientalism and Former Italian Colonies. An Interview with Shirin Ramzanali Fazel*, in *Orientalismi italiani Vol. 1*, Gabriele Proglia (ed.), Torino, Antares, 2012, p. 224.

⁷⁷ Jennifer Burns and Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *Narrating Mogadishu*, http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/ias/current/earlycareer/events/migration/podcast/ [accessed 2 August 2013; conversation-interview held at the seminar ‘Migration, Discrimination and Belonging: Transnational Spaces in Post-colonial Europe’ at the University of Warwick, 6 March 2013].

⁷⁸ Patrizia Ceola, *Migrazioni Narranti. L’Africa degli scrittori italiani e l’Italia degli scrittori africani: un chiasmo culturale e linguistico*, Padova, Libreria Universitaria, 2011, p. 245 [my translation].

⁷⁹ Jennifer Burns, *Fragments of Impegno. Interpretations of Commitment in Contemporary Italian Narrative, 1980-2000*, Leeds, Northern University Press, 2001, p. 177.

⁸⁰ Graziella Parati, *Migration Italy*, cit., pp.115-116.

⁸¹ Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *Lontano da Mogadiscio. Far From Mogadishu*, cit., p. 81.

undermine the notion of Somalia as the object of other national or regional narratives and to present it rather as the subject of its own narrative, still in the making”.⁸² The present version also describes a new imaginary community to which Shirin feels she belongs: the one established by other emigrants in Italy and then in the UK, like the woman of Moroccan origin called Leila who the writer meets in Birmingham and who she converses with in Italian.⁸³

Because it is simultaneously “a rhapsody of ideas, reflections, biographical notes, political considerations”,⁸⁴ it is difficult to see *Far from Mogadishu* as being part of a strictly autobiographical genre. For this reason, Loredana Polezzi points out that the hybrid form of the text is linked to the author’s complex description of identity: “*Lontano da Mogadiscio* is a patchwork of passages, often less than a page long, which take a multitude of forms: from the poem to the mini-historical essay to the etymological gloss, the anecdote, the list, or the intimate diary entry. [...] the fragmented structure of the [text] is also symptomatic of the fractured personal and collective histories with which [the author identifies]”.⁸⁵ The literary hybridity of *Far from Mogadishu* has also been underlined by Riannon Noel Welch, who states that this text has “a narrative voice that is at once autobiographical and anthropological (the narrator shuttles between the positions of subject, observer and ethnographic informant), and [she] def[ies] generic classification as travel narrative, journalistic reportage, autobiography or ethnography”.⁸⁶ Because of these reasons, Jennifer Burns argues that *Far from Mogadishu* is a literary product which is “at once familiar (autobiography, testimony, narrative) and perplexing (all and none of these)”.⁸⁷ Thanks to its “hybrid potential” and to the narration “not just of stories but also histories, diaries, or testimony”, this text represents a clear example of politically

⁸² Jennifer Burns, *Migrant Imaginaries*, cit., p. 125.

⁸³ Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *Lontano da Mogadiscio. Far From Mogadishu*, cit., p. 211.

⁸⁴ Raffaele Taddeo, *Lontano da Mogadiscio*, in “El ghibli. Rivista online di letteratura della migrazione” 23 (2009), http://www.el-ghibli.provincia.bologna.it/id_1-issue_06_24-section_6-index_pos_1.html [accessed 2 August 2013; my translation].

⁸⁵ Loredana Polezzi, *Mixing Mother Tongues: Language, Narrative and the Spaces of Memory in Postcolonial Works by Italian Women Writers (Part 2)*, in “Romance Studies” 24.3 (2006), p. 219.

⁸⁶ Riannon Noel Welch, *Intimate Truth and (Post)colonial Knowledge in Shirin Ramzanali Fazel’s Lontano da Mogadiscio*, in *National Belongings: Hybridity in Italian Colonial and Postcolonial Cultures*, Jacqueline Andall, Derek Duncan (eds.), London, Peter Lang, 2010, p. 217.

⁸⁷ Jennifer Burns, *Fragments of Impegno*, cit., p. 177.

committed writing in postmodern Italy.⁸⁸

The unique character of this text is also signalled by the presence of diverse literary genres in the text. For example, *Far from Mogadishu* opens and closes with two poems, “Rainbow” and “The Dawning of a New Day”, which was not present in the 1994 version. The centrality of “Rainbow”⁸⁹ in the text was clearly recognised by Shirin in an interview with Rebecca Hopkins: “The rainbow for me is both harmony and beauty, different colours which go well together. We are people coming from different countries who must learn to live in harmony. The key word for me is respect for yourself... and for others”.⁹⁰ This poem is a trace of the very first draft of the text that the writer had conceived before meeting the publisher Datanews to be a diary and a collection of poems entitled *Incense, Myrrh and Gunpowder*.

The first part of the work also distances itself from the autobiographical dimension, and presents more didactic sections aimed at bringing the Italian audience closer to another culture. The knowledge of the other seems crucial to combat intolerance, given that for Shirin racism is the product of “ignorance”.⁹¹ Indeed, as the writer states in the poem that opens the book: “if you hated us even before meeting or if you pitied us to relieve your conscience, you have been completely mistaken”.⁹² The first section of *Far from Mogadishu* describes Somalia as an idyllic world, “a country in which every child would want to grow and play” or a “country of fairytales”,⁹³ repeatedly using the forms “there was” and “there were”.⁹⁴ This strategic device might have been adopted in order to bridge the gap with a reader used to magnificent descriptions of Africa, like those found for example in Karen Blixen’s famous book *Out of Africa*.⁹⁵ According to Graziella Parati, this fairy-tale dimension “attempts to neutralize the present

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 162.

⁸⁹ Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *Lontano da Mogadiscio. Far From Mogadishu*, cit., p. 141.

⁹⁰ Rebecca Hopkins, cit. [my translation].

⁹¹ Rhiannon Noel Welch, cit., p. 221.

⁹² Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *Lontano da Mogadiscio. Far From Mogadishu*, cit., p. 141.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 142.

⁹⁴ Rebecca Hopkins, cit. [my translation].

⁹⁵ Karen Blixen, *Out of Africa*, London, Penguin, 2001 (1937). According to Ngugi wa Thiong’o this text is as well-known as it is dangerous, since it does not only offer a fantastical and stereotyped image of Africa, but often compares the natives to animals, providing a powerful racist imaginary. See Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Her Cook, Her Dog: Karen Blixen’s Africa*, in Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedom*, London, Heinemann, 1993, pp. 150-153.

destruction of Somalia and the vision of an apocalyptic future”,⁹⁶ changes in the rest of the novel, where Shirin historicises the unequal power relations that her country of origin has experienced and delivers “a social commentary on how western ideology is responsible for keeping Africa trapped into stereotypical misrepresentations”.⁹⁷ As Daniele Comberiati points out in relation to Shirin’s short story *Mukulaal (Cat)*⁹⁸ – but I believe this statement could particularly be applied to the fourth section of *Far from Mogadishu* –, she narrates violence “through a bitter realism”⁹⁹ which aims to provoke reflection on the current political situation in Somalia.

Far from Mogadishu therefore seems to be a text which manifests not only an “equal dialogue between cultures of the world”,¹⁰⁰ but also a reaction to intolerance, a response to western hegemony, and a linguistic and cultural fracture. In particular, this aspect of *Far from Mogadishu* is made clear by language which is stretched to its limits thanks to the possibilities offered by translation and self-translation. At first glance, *Far from Mogadishu* is written in standard Italian, which is “harmonious, filtered through a veil of sensitivity and lightness, with the main objective of making the reader reflect”,¹⁰¹ and with a style which has been defined as “sober”,¹⁰² “light”,¹⁰³ “poetic and imaginative”.¹⁰⁴ For example, Monica Venturini points out that Shirin uses “direct language, a paratactic style which aims at an effective synthesis and at the evocation of the smallest details in a non-linear flow of memories”.¹⁰⁵ The choice of this language appears to be intended to confirm Shirin’s linguistic ability in Italian, called into question by many of her compatriots: “[in reply to a question in Italian] the

⁹⁶ Graziella Parati, *Introduction*, in *Mediterranean Crossroads. Migration Literature in Italy*, Graziella Parati (ed.), Madison, Fairleigh Dickinson Press, 1999, p. 30.

⁹⁷ Roberta Di Carmine, *Italophone Writing and The Intellectual Space of Creativity*, cit., p. 47.

⁹⁸ Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *Mukulaal (Gatto)*, cit.

⁹⁹ Daniele Comberiati, *Quando le periferie diventano centro: le identità delle città postcoloniali*, in *Roma d’Abissinia. Cronache dai resti dell’Impero: Asmara, Mogadiscio, Addis Abeba*, Daniele Comberiati (ed.), Cuneo, Nerosubianco, p. 84 [my translation].

¹⁰⁰ Alessandra Atti di Sarro, cit., p. 9 [my translation].

¹⁰¹ Raffaele Taddeo, cit. [my translation].

¹⁰² Rebecca Hopkins, cit. [my translation].

¹⁰³ Raffaele Taddeo, cit. [my translation].

¹⁰⁴ Jennifer Burns, *Fragments of Impegno*, p. 177.

¹⁰⁵ Monica Venturini, “Toccare il futuro”. *Scritture postcoloniali femminili*, in *Fuori centro. Percorsi postcoloniali nella letteratura italiana*, Roberto Derobertis (ed.), Roma, Aracne, 2010, p.123 [my translation].

person would look at me and start to articulate words clearly, using verbs in infinite in a loud voice”.¹⁰⁶

However, the linguistic particularity of *Far from Mogadishu* is found in the way in which Italian and Somali dialogue in the text. The presence of Somali words in the Italian text does not only show “the author’s determination to maintain a direct and vivid connection with [her] cultural and linguistic roots”,¹⁰⁷ but also and above all the desire to re-shape Italian, making it welcoming to other languages, and keeping the Somali language alive in other cultural contexts. In other words, *Far from Mogadishu* signals a lack of attachment exclusively to a nostalgic dimension of Somalia in linguistic terms too.

The complex linguistic intersection in this text can be better understood in relation to some of the choices made by the publishers, which differentiate the present edition from the first edition, such as the translation of Somali words inserted into the text rather than into footnotes, and the double form of Italian-English. The 1994 edition of *Far from Mogadishu* was aimed at an audience unused to coming across foreign words in an Italian text. Including the translation of Somali expressions in footnotes meant that the readers had to deal with a language they did not know, and it also complicated the expressive form of the text. Yet Lucie Benchouiha has argued that this communicative device had the effect of making the Somali expressions “more unfamiliar and alien to her readers since the very foreignness of some of [Shirin]’s language is actually multiplied through this act of italicizing, footnoting, and translating these terms. This method of dealing with language therefore draws attention to the linguistic hybridity of the narrative and, as a result, highlights a different, non-Italian identity for the author of this work”.¹⁰⁸ This comment allows us to understand how the author’s construction of identity takes place also through language and the way in which this is presented to the reader. The footnotes in the first version also had the effect of interrupting the flow of reading, presenting Somali as an

¹⁰⁶ Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *Lontano da Mogadiscio. Far From Mogadishu*, cit., p. 162.

¹⁰⁷ Gabriella Romani, *Italian Identity and Immigrant Writing: The Shaping of a New Discourse*, in *ItaliAfrica: Bridging Continents and Cultures*, Sante Matteo (ed.), Stony Brook, Forum Italicum, 2001, p. 371.

¹⁰⁸ Lucie Benchouiha, *Hybrid Identities? Immigrant Women's Writing in Italy*, in “Italian Studies” 61.2, 2006, p. 255.

intrusive presence within the Italian text and the author of the text as an intruder within the Italian social context.

By positioning the Somali expressions directly in the text and making them dialogue with the Italian, this edition of *Far from Mogadishu* differentiates itself from that of 1994, which instead seems to give Italian a greater importance in meaning compared to Somali by using footnotes. The choice of a different translation strategy in the present edition of the text seems to better reflect both the description of identity which the author herself offers – that is of a person for whom “Somali and Italian culture have always been mixed together [and] the two idioms do not [have] border lines” –,¹⁰⁹ and the changed conditions in Italy, in which immigration is no longer a new phenomenon, and the public is increasingly used to linguistic deterritorialisation.

The original work on Shirin’s language found a natural development when the writer came to live in Birmingham, in the UK, and translated her novel into English, first publishing part of it in a magazine.¹¹⁰ The operation of translation then led to the re-writing of the Italian work, to the addition of some parts not present in the original version (“The Triumphal Arch”, “*Stasera mi butto*”, “The Well”, “The Purse”), and to the modification of the first three chapters of the book. The new parts in Italian were again translated (or in some cases re-written) into English. This recent work on the text makes another aspect already present in the 1994 edition even more explicit, that is the close relationship that the writing of *Far from Mogadishu* has with linguistic and cultural translation.

If it is read in the light of a recent article by Loredana Polezzi,¹¹¹ Shirin’s work can also be placed alongside that of other Italian authors who have reflected on the fragmentary, polyphonic and polycentric character of language, and have placed intercultural translation and reflection on mobility at the centre of their work. For a partial intersection of their trajectories of migration, take for example Luigi Meneghello, who moved from a village in the Veneto region of Italy not far

¹⁰⁹ Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *Le storie intrecciate della diaspora somala*, cit., p. 22.

¹¹⁰ Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *Gezira*, in *Sandwell’s Book of Happiness – Second Edition*, Birmingham, Sandwell NHS, 2012, p. 16, http://well-happy.co.uk/media/display/SPCT-HappinessBooklet-Jun12-web_frie.pdf [accessed 2 August 2013].

¹¹¹ Loredana Polezzi, *Polylingual Writing in Today’s Italy*, in *New Perspectives in Italian Cultural Studies Definition*, Vol. 1, Madison, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012.

from Shirin's house to the UK. Although they come from completely different cultural backgrounds, this writer and Shirin share the same reflection on the heterogeneity that characterises each national context, beyond attempts to make literary history conform to a homogenous and monoglossic template.

In its new garb *Far from Mogadishu* aims to narrate a life experience which crosses physical, political and cultural boundaries to a transnational audience. *Far from Mogadishu* is a text which brings hope to Somalis, wherever they are, and in which the memory of "that" Mogadishu survives. A text which "can contribute to the literary cultures of Italy (and of Europe) in a powerful and political way that problematises our critical and intellectual convictions (or presumptions)".¹¹² A text which escapes easy categorisation, and which at a distance of twenty years keeps intact its surprising vitality and its ability to narrate the world in which we live from a perspective that is innovative, lucid and touching.

Translated by Kate Willman.

¹¹² Jennifer Burns, *Fragments of Impegno*, cit., p. 177.